

# Foucault's *Las Meninas* and Art-Historical Methods

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## Summary

This article focuses on the ways in which Foucault's *Las Meninas* has been represented and critiqued in art-historical texts and endeavours to gauge its significance to the discipline, in particular, the "New Art History" of the 1970s and 1980s. Art historians have not yet adequately engaged the historical, philosophical, theoretical and methodological dimension of Foucault's articulation of an archaeology of the structures of thought and the significance of this inquiry to the writing of art histories. However, Foucault's unprecedented reading of Velázquez's painting – unfettered by art-historical methods – played a significant role in facilitating a critique of the limitations of canonical art-historical interpretive procedures. Art historians Svetlana Alpers, Norman Bryson and Eric Fernie have, for example, drawn attention to the insularity of the discipline; its emphasis on connoisseurship; its preoccupation with the construction of meaning via archival documents and iconographic and stylistic analysis. Against this framework Foucault's elucidation of *Las Meninas*'s self-reflexive meditation on the nature of representation was groundbreaking.

## Opsomming

Die fokus van hierdie artikel val op die maniere waarop Foucault se *Las Meninas* in kunsgeskiedkundige tekste voorgestel en beoordeel is en poog om die belangrikheid daarvan vir kunsgeskiedenis oor die algemeen en die "Nuwe Kunsgeskeidenis" van die 1970's en 1980's in die besonder te bepaal. Kunsgeskiedkundiges het nog nie die historiese, filosofiese, teoretiese en metodologiese dimensie van Foucault se verwoording van 'n argeologie van die denkstrukture en die belangrikheid van hierdie ondersoek genoegsaam by die skryf van kunsgeskiedenis betrek nie. Nietemin het Foucault se ongeëwenaarde lesing van Velázquez se skildery – losgemaak van kunsgeskiedkundige metodes – die weg gebaan vir 'n beoordeling van die beperkinge van kanonieke kunsgeskiedkundige verklarende prosedures. Die kunsgeskiedkundiges Svetlana Alpers, Norman Bryson en Eric Fernie het byvoorbeeld die aandag gevestig op die bekrompenheid van die dissipline; die klem wat dit plaas op die kunskenner; 'n behepthed met die konstruksie van betekenis aan die hand van argiefstukke en ikonografiese en stilistiese ontleding. Teen dié agtergrond het Foucault baanbrekerswerk verrig met sy toeligting van *Las Meninas* se selfrefleksiewe besinning oor die aard van voorstelling.

Michel Foucault's study of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*<sup>1</sup> was first published in the volume *Les Mots et les choses* in 1966 which was followed, in 1970, by the English translation titled *The Order of Things*. In "Las Meninas", which is the title of the opening chapter of *The Order of Things*, Foucault focused on the artwork itself as though it were before him, describing in extraordinary detail what he saw. His seemingly unobtrusive actions – looking and describing – elicited observations that, when positioned within the context of contemporary art-historical practice, were unprecedented. His examination of the painting is neither prescribed by, nor filtered through the various texts of art-historical investigation. For example, the artist's biography is absent and there is no declaration of technical virtuosity and genius. Neither is there an acknowledgement of sources and influences, nor an exploration of questions of style and iconography. Nor is there interpretation, through the selection and interpretation of archival documents, of the relation between the painting, the artist's social context and his relationship with his patrons. In one instance, Foucault comments on the art-historical practice of identifying the subjects represented: "These proper names would form useful landmarks and avoid ambiguous designations; they would tell us in any case what the painter is looking at, and the majority of the characters in the picture along with him" (2002: 10). But the convenience of the proper name, in this particular context, is "merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words to fold over the other as though they were equivalents" (p. 10). Foucault proposes a different relation of language to painting:

[T]he relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can they be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.

(Foucault 2002: 10)

Instead, Foucault proposes to "keep the relation of language to vision open", to "treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided" (2002: 10). Retaining a conception of the irreducible relationship between language and vision as a point of departure entails "eras[ing] proper names and preserv[ing] the infinity of the task" (p. 10).

Indeed it is through Foucault's language – his meticulous, astute description of the visual world before him – that the painting's self-reflexive

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1. *Las Meninas* was painted in 1656 by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez for his patron Phillip IV of Spain.

acknowledgement of its artifice and crucially its status as representation emerges. His act of observing and describing draws from the pictorial surface a complex network of visual exchanges which simultaneously reinforces and dissolves assumptions about the relationship between painter, subject-model, world and viewer; between those who represent, those who are represented and those who look:

From the eyes of the painter to what he is observing there runs a compelling line that we, the onlookers, have no power of evading: it runs through the real picture and emerges from its surface to join the place from which we see the painter observing us; this dotted line reaches to us ineluctably, and links us to the representation of the picture. In appearance, this locus is a simple one; a matter of pure reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us. A mere confrontation, eyes catching one another's glance, direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross. And yet this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints. The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity.

(Foucault 2002: 4-5)

Foucault concludes:

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us ... representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.

(Foucault 2002: 18)

Situated within the context of *The Order of Things* – the major concern of which is Foucault's articulation of his archaeology of thought – Velázquez's *Las Meninas* marks a threshold in the history of systems of thought. The painting's significance rests in its illumination of an epistemic shift – what Foucault conceptualises as a discontinuity in the *episteme* of Western culture.<sup>2</sup> Its recognition of its status as representation is made possible by a

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2. In the preface to *The Order of Things* he conceives of two “great discontinuities” the first of which “inaugurates the Classical age” (roughly

reconfiguration of the structures that define the conditions, borderlines and possibilities of knowledge through time.

This essay does not situate Foucault's *Las Meninas* within the context of its publication in *The Order of Things*, Foucault's articulation of archaeological inquiry and his theoretical and methodological trajectory. Neither is it an attempt to engage with the painting itself. This essay aims rather to draw attention to the ways in which Foucault's *Las Meninas* has been situated within art history and to gauge its significance to the discipline. It will focus specifically on the importance of Foucault's examination of Velázquez's painting to art historian Svetlana Alpers's<sup>3</sup> 1983 essay – "Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas*"<sup>4</sup> – and to Bryson's 1988 book of essays titled *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* within which Foucault's examination of *Las Meninas* appeared.<sup>5</sup> The volume was edited by art historian Norman Bryson.<sup>6</sup>

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halfway through the mid-seventeenth century) and the second of which marks the advent of the "modern age" at the beginning of the nineteenth century (2002: xxiv).

3. In 1983 Svetlana Alpers was Professor of Art History at the University of California, Berkeley.
4. This essay was published in the journal *Representations*, I, No. I, February 1983, pp. 31-42. It was later published in the 1995 critical anthology *Art History and Its Methods*. Texts published in this volume were selected and commented upon by Eric Fernie, then Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art and the University of London.

Significantly, in *Calligram* (1988), Norman Bryson argues that journals such as *Representations* played an important role in the constitution of a progressive art history. He writes:

One index of change is the number of new journals that in the past ten years, and strikingly in the past five, have appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, journals that explicitly go beyond the discipline's status quo: in the United States we have seen the emergence of *October* and *Representations* in the United Kingdom, of *Art History* and *World and Image*, alongside the continued flourishing of *Block*.

(Bryson 1988: xiii)

5. This paper chooses to focus on art historians Alpers and Bryson, both of whom are considered major figures in what was largely constituted, in the 1970s and 1980s, as the "New Art History". Alpers's 1983 essay and Bryson's 1988 introduction to *Calligram* situated Foucault's study of Velázquez's painting within the context of art-historical methodological and theoretical concerns. Significantly, substantial debate about Velázquez's *Las*

*Meninas* has been initiated by scholars working within the context of philosophy and there is some engagement, on the part of these scholars, with the work of art historians. For example, John R. Searle (see below) included Alpers in his acknowledgements and Amy M. Schmitter (see below) commented on art historian Leo Steinberg's response to an article on *Las Meninas*.

Searle, in an essay titled "*Las Meninas* and the paradoxes of Pictorial Representation" (1980) writes: "For the philosopher of language [*Las Meninas*] poses a special challenge in the theory of representation. It produces in me the same feeling of puzzlement that I get in pondering the set theoretical paradoxes or the antinomy of the liar, and in this discussion I want to make quite explicit the nature of its paradoxes" (p. 477). Searle analyses the painting "from within the canons of classical pictorial representation" (p. 477). He refers briefly to Foucault's *Las Meninas*: "[Foucault] begins his analysis of the classical seventeenth-century system of thought, in *Les Mots et les choses*, with a discussion of the work, concluding that it is perhaps 'the representation, as it were, of classical representation'" (1980: 477).

Snyder and Cohen published a response to Searle in an article titled "Reflexions on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost" (1980). At the time, Snyder was Associate Professor of Humanities and of Art and Design, and Cohen Associate Professor of Philosophy, both at the University of Chicago. They critiqued what they identified as four of Searle's assertions arguing that Searle is mistaken in his analysis of the painting and that his "error originates in a misconception of how viewpoint functions in the construction and interpretation of perspective painting and how a viewer identifies the point from which a picture in perspective is projected" (1980: 430). While Snyder and Cohen do not engage with Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas* in any detail, they note: "This essay was first conceived as a very brief response to Searle, intended to refute a single technical claim on which his analysis and that of Michel Foucault rest" (1980: 429, fn. 1). Later, they declare:

There is no question of how the painting looks or what the sentence seems to mean to whom; and it must be this way with *Las Meninas* if there is to be any point in bringing into its analysis the frightful equipment suggested by Foucault and actually deployed by Searle. The point of view must first be given; and it is – but Searle and Foucault get it wrong.

(Snyders & Cohen 1980: 440)

Amy Schmitter's essay "Picturing Power: Representation and *Las Meninas*" (1996) interrogates conceptions of the notion "representation". She engages with Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas* as a "self-reflexive exemplification of representation, a representation of representation itself", critiquing his argument that "the mirror yields its reflection and its relation to that reflection unequivocally" (1996: 257). She writes further:

Foucault's express aim in the piece under discussion is to consider *Las*

In their work as art historians, both Alpers and Bryson draw attention to the contribution of scholars writing about art, *outside* of the parameters of art history. Alpers introduces her essay thus: “Along with Vermeer’s *Art of Painting* and Courbet’s *Studio*, Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* is surely one of the greatest representations of pictorial representation in all of Western painting” (1995: 285). She then poses the questions: “Why has this work eluded full and satisfactory discussion by art historians? Why should it be that the major study, the most serious and sustained piece of writing on this work in our time is by Michel Foucault?” (p. 258). In a similar vein, drawing attention to the significance of work produced outside of art history, Bryson comments:

When Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, analyses Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, and Jacques Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, discusses Holbein’s painting of *The French Ambassadors*, we find important theses being presented across what is to us an entirely unknown and unfamiliar idiom, a form of writing that is not art history as we in the English-speaking world know it (yet if it is not art history, what is it?).

(Bryson 1988: xiv)

Prior to Foucault’s study, arguably the most well-known text on Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* in the English-speaking world of the 1960s and early 1970s, was Kenneth Clark’s essay published in the volume *Looking at*

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*Meninas* as an exhibition of a specific, peculiarly seventeenth-century notion of representation. If we are to treat his work as a kind of secondary source, as in some sense about *Las Meninas*, then I think it is wise to keep both the limitations and the ambition of this goal in mind. Foucault’s account succeeds at the very least in demonstrating that representation need not be analysed according to a picture-theory, that it has a complicated structure, and that it is capable of proliferating and turning on itself (something frequently overlooked by picture-theories of representation). But we may wonder whether Foucault has accurately accounted for the way that *Las Meninas* manipulates its structure – particularly its perspectival structure with respect to the mirror.

(Schmitter 1996: 258)

6. Bryson was then with the University of Rochester. Both Bryson and Alpers have often been described as “New Art Historians” although Alpers resists being labelled as such, stating:

I’m suspicious of programs and of labels like the “new art history”. I resist the appellation. I do my work, and I’m not conscious as I’m doing it that it’s part of the new art history. I’m studying art. This is a difficult thing to do. I’m simply trying to do it in the best way I can.

(<http://prelectur.Stanford.edu/lectures/alpers>)

*Pictures*. The book, initially published in 1960, was reprinted in the early 1970s and is a compilation of essays that had appeared in the *Sunday Times*. While initially written for a newspaper and not for a strictly scholarly public, Clark was trained as an art historian.<sup>7</sup> He was considered a conservative and controversial figure in part due to his perspectives on modern art. In 1966 he began writing and producing *Civilisation* for the BBC, a television series on the history of art that made him internationally famous when it was broadcast in 1969. The following is an extract taken from Clark's essay on Velázquez's painting:

Each focal point involves us in a new set of relations; and to paint a complex group like the *Meninas*, the painter must carry in his head a single consistent scale of relations which he can apply throughout. He may use all kinds of devices to help him to do this – perspective is one of them – but ultimately the truth about a complete visual impression depends on one thing, truth of tone.  
(Clark 1960: 36)

[One] cannot look for long at *Las Meninas* without wanting to find out how it is done. I remember that when it hung in Geneva in 1939 I used to go very early in the morning, before the gallery was open, and try to stalk it, as if it really were alive .... I would start from as far away as I could, when the illusion was complete, and come gradually nearer, until suddenly what had been a hand, and a ribbon, and a piece of velvet, dissolved into a salad of beautiful brush strokes .... Prosaically minded people, from Palomino onwards, have asserted that Velazquez must have used exceptionally long brushes, but the brushes he holds in the *Meninas* are of normal length, and he also carries a mahlstick, which implies that he put on the last delicate touches from very close to. The fact is that, like all transformations in art, it was not achieved by a technical trick, which can be found out and described, but by a flash of imaginative perception. At the moment when Velazquez's brush turned appearances into paint, he was performing an act of faith which involved his whole being.

(Clark 1960: 36-37)

On the network of exchanged glances or looks – so central to Foucault's description – Clark comments only briefly:

There is, to begin with, the arrangement of the forms in space, that most revealing and personal expression of our sense of order; and then there is the

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7. Clark was trained at Winchester College and Trinity College, Oxford. His career included the directorship of the National Gallery and Surveyor of the King's Pictures. From 1969-1979 he was Chancellor of York University and a trustee of the British Museum.

interplay of their glances, which creates a different network of relationships. Finally there are the characters themselves.

(Clark 1960: 38)

Clark's *Las Meninas* is a composite of his flamboyant and idiosyncratic voice (including a style of writing which in many instances reads like a work of fiction); anecdote; biography; connoisseurship; the reverence of the artist as genius; the art-historical practice of identifying influences and formal and stylistic analysis. It is significant that Foucault's method of observation and description, without the constraints of art-historical texts and methods of analysis, was able to derive from Velázquez's work a reading that, within the context of the discipline, was unprecedented. In fact, in his introduction to the critical anthology – *Art History and Its Methods* – art historian Eric Fernie draws attention to the most influential strands of art-historical practice from the mid-twentieth century to the early 1970s.

Fernie comments that the “decline of Hegelianism combined with the effects of modernism on art history gave renewed vigour to the study of the individual artist supported by the techniques of empiricism and connoisseurship (including quality, the canon, style, biography and sources)” (1995: 18). Fernie notes the significance of Erwin Panofsky's iconography; E.H. Gombrich's cultural history; the social history of art developed in the 1940s and 1950s by such Marxist art historians as Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser whose work followed the “pioneering work of the American anthropological art historian Meyer Shapiro” (p. 18). He notes “other aspects of Marxist analysis” which are “being applied in more detailed ways to questions related to the social function of art” (for example, the analyses of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno) and to the “character and status of art” (the work of the critic Clement Greenberg) (p. 18). Fernie argues that from the early 1970s onwards, art history and its methods have come under scrutiny for a number of reasons:

the narrowness of its range of subject matter and concentration on individual artists whom it classified as geniuses; for its restricted set of methods, consisting chiefly of connoisseurship, the analysis of style and iconography, quality, the canon, dating arguments and biography, for the uniformity of degree curricula offered by departments of the history of art, for its ignoring not only of the social context of art, artist and public, but also structures of power, especially those of relations between art historians and the owners of valuable works of art; and perhaps most important of all, for the lack of attention paid to the changes which had been taking place in the related disciplines of literature and history in the 1960s.

(Fernie 1995: 18-19)



Fernie outlines the subsequent development of the “New Art Histories”:

The new art historians, as they have sometimes been called, shifted the centre of gravity away from objects and towards social context and ideology, that is to the structures of social power, and from there to politics, feminism, psychoanalysis and theory.

(Fernie 1995: 19)

He comments on the ways in which theoretical developments in France impacted on art-historical practice and cites the examples of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Of Foucault's influence, he writes:

[Foucault's discourse analysis describes] his view of the fractured and multifarious character of power relations in a society; in these terms a painting or a building can be seen as the nodal point of an infinite number of discourses, social, artistic, psychological and so on, and used as a means of identifying hidden agendas of power and control. Foucault's approach reminds us that the art of the past is the art of victors, and that the work of historians is itself conditioned by a web of discourses.

(Fernie 1995: 20)

Yet while Fernie notes the significance of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault for the “new art histories”, their work is not included in the anthology *Art History and Its Methods* and there is no mention, in his introduction, of Foucault's work on *Las Meninas*. However, included in the volume are excerpts from Svetlana Alpers's 1983 essay<sup>8</sup> in which she emphasises the importance of Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas* for art-historical methods.

In *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, Foucault's essay features along with work by theorists such as Jan Mukařovský,<sup>9</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes all of whom are not art historians. In his introduction to the volume, Bryson examines the significance of these writings for current debates about art-historical methods and interpretive practices. He suggests that “perhaps the most significant feature of such writing in France [is] the absence of the sense of threshold, of border police ready to pounce ... one feels the absence of the

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8. As noted earlier, Alpers's essay was titled “Interpretation without representation”.

9. Bryson writes: “The status of painting as sign is so fundamental for this alternative or New Art History that the present collection has been prefaced by the great essay on signs by Jan Mukařovský (made an honorary Frenchman for the occasion)” (1988: xvii).

sense of apology with which the writer in England tends to marginalise his work in the visual arts” (Foucault 1988: xv). As an example, he cites Kenneth Clark’s “grand refusal to allow the least whiff of the academy to compromise the pleasures of the cultivated amateur ... of the wonderful essays on art that in England crop up, yet always at the margins of the distinguished career elsewhere” (p. xv).

Bryson proceeds to express concern about art-historical methods within the English-speaking world on a number of levels: He argues that art history, in tending to emphasise the “context of the work’s production” neglects its own “artistic and critical present” and further, that its persistent preoccupation with archival documents was restrictive (1988: xvi). Bryson, critical of what he conceives of as art history’s insularity, its inability to reflect critically upon its methods and its disengagement from important scholarly debates, poses the questions:

Why do we, in England and America, limit ourselves in this way? When literary criticism, for example, has by contrast become so broad in its horizons, so self-aware in methodology, so confident of its right to read from the present? .... One answer must be that for us the image is not yet particularly thought of in terms of signs, as something to be interpreted.

(Bryson 1988: xvi)

He suggests that, within the English-speaking world, there was a narrow opposition between art history and art criticism (the latter was explained as “writing about contemporary art”) (Bryson 1988: xv). Significantly, Bryson ascribes less of a dissociation between art history and art criticism in France to “the far more sophisticated understanding of the relation of signs to history that appears in the great intellectual movements in France since 1945: existentialism and phenomenology, but particularly structuralism and post-structuralism” (p. xvi). Conceiving the “status of painting as sign” as “fundamental for this alternative or New Art History”, Bryson continues:

The art history reflected in the present volume of essays reacts to the image as to any other work of signs. It is naturally hermeneutic, and it knows reading to be as complex and intricate a process as, for academic or Warburg iconology, it is the comparatively simple decoding of emblems and motifs.

(Bryson 1988: xvii)

Bryson explicates his “emphasis on sign”, arguing that “sign” must, in the first instance, “displace” the term “perception” (1988: xvii). Opposing perceptualism to semiology and structuralism, he argues that perceptualism “always renders art banal, since its view never lifts above ocular accuracy, and always renders art trivial, since the making of images seems to go on ...

out of society, at the margins of social concerns, in some eddy away from the flow of power" (p. xxii).

While Bryson's introduction attributes particular importance to the concept of the sign in French scholarship, he did not touch on Foucault's tenuous relationship to structuralism and Foucault's attempt, in his foreword to the English translation of *The Order of Things*, to dissociate himself from it. Foucault states:

This last point is a request to the English-speaking reader. In France, certain half-witted "commentators" persist in labelling me a "structuralist". I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concepts, or key terms that characterise structural analysis. I should be grateful if a more serious public would free me from a connection that certainly does me honour but that I have not deserved. There may be certain similarities between the works of the structuralist and my own work. It would hardly behove me, of all people, to claim that my discourse is independent of conditions and rules of which I am very largely unaware, and which determine other work that is being done today. But it is only too easy to avoid the trouble of analysing such work by giving it an admittedly impressive-sounding, but inaccurate, label.

(Foucault 2002: xv)

Despite Foucault's unequivocal disengagement from structuralism in his preface to *The Order of Things*, scholars have pointed out that his relationship to it is more complicated. While recognising the difficulties of categorising Foucault's intellectual trajectory, Sara Mills points to his association with members of the literary theory group Tel Quel which included Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. Mills problematises the label of "structuralism" for Foucault's project:

With Barthes and Kristeva, [Foucault] became part of that moment of intellectual questioning labelled structuralism, where theorists attempted to move away from concentrating on the genius of the individual creative writer to analyse the underlying structures of literary and non-literary texts.

(Mills 2003: 26)

We must be tentative when suggesting that Foucault was a structuralist, since his relationship with structuralism was always rather tenuous, and theorists such as Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan ... Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault who are generally taken to be structuralist can perhaps be seen as held together only by their negative relationship with liberal humanism rather than being united by a common philosophy.

(Mills 2003: 27)

Thus, while Mills signals the ambiguity of Foucault's relation to structuralism, Bryson's introductory essay accentuates, in a somewhat one-dimensional manner, the importance of structuralism to French scholars in general. In emphasising intellectual work on the "relation of signs to history", he does not allude to the co-ordinates and complexity of the intellectual terrains from which the *Calligram* essays emerged. Neither does he indicate the ways in which these essays might relate to each other. Bryson does not touch on the question of Foucault's particular historical-philosophical project expressed in the Preface to *The Order of Things* as "not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of that word, as an "archaeology" (1988: xxiv).<sup>10</sup> Bryson does not spell out the implications, for art-historical inquiry, of Foucault's reading of the painting in terms of a shift in epistemic configurations in the mid-seventeenth century. Nor does he examine the relationship, posited by Foucault, between art and the structures that define and limit the possibilities of knowledge. Bryson concludes that "writing about art will be seen to have in fact two mandates: archival<sup>11</sup> and hermeneutic" (1988: xxviii). He defines the "hermeneutic mandate" as follows:

The ... hermeneutic mandate refers to the image as something to be interpreted and read. One of the great weaknesses of prevailing art history must be its neglect of "reading skills" and practical criticism. Whereas students of literature regularly spend hours in class wrangling over the interpretation of texts, the level of reading among students of art history is hardly developed at all, but left somehow to take care of itself.

(Bryson 1988: xxviii)

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10. Foucault articulates the possibilities of his archaeological method:
- I am not concerned, therefore, to describe the progress of knowledge towards an objectivity in which today's science can finally be recognised; what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility.
- (Foucault 2002: xxiii, xxiv)
11. With regard to the "archival mandate", Bryson proposes that the art-historical preoccupation with tracing the "painting back to its original context of production" must be "considered to be a much more global affair, consisting of the complex interaction among all the practices that make up the sphere of culture: the scientific, military, literary, and religious practices; the legal and political structure; the structures of class, sexuality and economic life in the given society" (Bryson 1988: xxviii).

Although Bryson does not engage with Foucault, he situates Foucault's approach to *Las Meninas* in terms of its significance for the "hermeneutic mandate". However, his introduction does not explicate in any detail his conception of the "hermeneutic", or Foucault's own conceptualisation of his methods and his particular reading of the visual image before him. However, Bryson's introduction does afford some insight into the critical debates on art history in the 1980s, and the methodological problems considered to be fundamental to the discipline. Commenting on the contribution of the "writing in France" to the formation of a "New Art History", he concludes:

What must surely be given up is the unadventurous assumption that strict archival methods, together with a strategy for converting painting into documents, are all we need to deal with visual representation .... If the present volume of essays helps to stimulate awareness of other ways of thinking about images, it will have done its work.

(Bryson 1988: xxix)

While Bryson's introductory essay does not engage the specific significance of Foucault's *Las Meninas* to art history, Alpers's 1983 essay<sup>12</sup> "Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas*" takes Foucault's essay as a departure point for her examination of art-historical methods in relation to Velázquez's painting and, in particular, her exploration of the discipline's fundamental inability to conceive of the painting outside of its canonical interpretive procedures.

Alpers's essay and indeed her work as a whole – is considered of great significance to the debates about art-historical method during the course of the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, reflecting on the changes that occurred within art history in the late 1970s and 1980s, Bryson acknowledges Alpers's contribution to the discipline: "Another index [of change] is the appearance and, more crucially, the institutional acceptance of a generation of new writers on art [of which Alpers is one], writers whose work consciously challenges or modifies prevailing and professional modes" (Bryson 1988: xiii). Alpers's essay was, and indeed continues to be, the most substantial exploration of Foucault's *Las Meninas* in relation to art-historical method. For Alpers, Foucault's approach to *Las Meninas* is unfettered by the constraints of the art-historical canon; its methods, theories and interpretive procedures. In particular, she argues that Foucault's act of looking and describing was undeterred by the contemporaneous art-historical separation

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12. I call it her 1983 essay in order to refer to the year in which it was first published but used the 1995 text in which it was reprinted.

of questions of meaning from those of representation and the discipline's preoccupation with iconography, naturalism and social history. Alpers draws attention to art history's evasion of *Las Meninas*'s complex and unusual configuration of the relationship between artist, world, subject, and viewer and demonstrated that, for the art historian, the painting's potential rests in its inherently self-reflexive contemplation of what it means to represent the world. She argues that art history's "insistence on the separation of questions of meaning from questions of representation" made *Las Meninas* "unthinkable within the established rubric of art history" (Alpers 1995: 287). "The problem", she asserts, "is endemic to the field" (p. 287).

Alpers proposes that two art-historical approaches underpinned the interpretation of *Las Meninas*: a concern with the "extraordinarily real presence of the painted world" and a preoccupation with accurately identifying the painting's subjects (1995: 285). The difficulty of the painting, she suggests, is encapsulated by the questions: "Where are the king and queen or what is the source of their reflections, and what is the subject being painted on the unseen canvas?" (p. 286). She claims that art historians neglected to grapple with this question and focused, rather, on the reconstruction, by means of archival documents, on the identities of the painting's subjects; Velázquez's relationship with his patrons and his social aspirations (p. 286).<sup>13</sup> Thus, art historians paid no attention to issues pertaining to the "nature of pictorial representation" (p. 286). She asserts that Foucault's – notably non-art-historical – approach to Velázquez's painting demonstrates that there "is a structural explanation built into the interpretive procedures of the discipline itself" and that this "has made a picture such as *Las Meninas* literally unthinkable under the rubric of art history" (p. 285). Similarly to Bryson, Alpers emphasises the significance of literary studies for questions of representation writing:

What is missing is a notion of representation or a concern with what it is to picture something. And it is therefore not surprising that in recent times it is students of texts who have most successfully turned their attention to the works of artists such as these – artists whose works are self-conscious and rich

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13. In fact, a 2004 "Oxford History of Art" on portraiture offers this kind of reading. The text is by Shearer West, Professor of Art History, University of Birmingham. West argues that Velázquez, in inserting himself into the work, reveals the prominence of his place in the household of Phillip IV of Spain. And this in a time in which "artists were usually considered well beneath their sitters in class terms .... In normal social interaction such classes did not meet, but in the portrait transaction they had to come together on quite intimate terms" (West 2004: 39).

in those representational concerns to which literary studies have been more attuned. Why should art history find itself in this fix?

(Alpers 1995: 287)

Alpers puts forward three reasons for the art-historical privileging of texts and the discipline's neglect of questions of representation: iconography, naturalistic standards and the social history of art. For example, she draws attention to the legacy of Erwin Panofsky's iconography concerned primarily with the meaning of subject matter. Iconography's "great achievement", Alpers notes, "was to demonstrate that representational pictures are not intended solely for perception, but can be read as having a secondary or deeper level of meaning" (p. 287). However, Panofsky did not engage with questions concerning the *nature* of pictorial representation and his well-known analysis of a man raising his hat in greeting is simply applied to the artwork. He "chooses to ignore ... that the man is not present but is re-presented in the picture" (p. 288). Ernst Gombrich, another of art history's figureheads, "treats representation as a matter of skill – skill in rendering and skill in perception" (Alpers 1995: 288). Thus, he "effectively credits the perfect representation with making pictures disappear: the question of representation retreats before the perfect illusion Velázquez produces of the painter, the princess, and her entourage" (p. 288). Alpers argues that, for art historians, the unprecedented nature of Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas* is invested in his engagement with the pictorial surface itself and the painting's self-reflexive acknowledgement of its status as representation. She writes: "Beginning ... with a determinate and determining notion of classical representation, he finds in this painting *its* representation" (p. 288). And further:

Foucault's exposition of this point proceeds through a careful viewing of the work which is impressive for its attentiveness. His interest in representation gives him the motive for looking which is lost to those who seek meaning in signs of a claim to social status. Foucault finely evokes the theme of reciprocity between an absent viewer and world in view.

(Alpers 1995: 288)

Thus, in contrast to art-historical methods constrained by a canon of approaches – iconography, naturalism and social history – Alpers concludes:

[Foucault's] interest in representation gives him the motive for looking which is lost to those who seek meaning in signs of a claim to social status. Foucault

finely evokes the theme of reciprocity between an absent viewer and world in view.

(Alpers 1995: 288)

Alpers's 1983 essay conceives of Foucault's *Las Meninas* as an important departure point for a critique of art-historical approaches to what is considered to be a landmark painting. However, Foucault's essay also plays a fundamental role in the genesis of Alpers's own art-historical interpretation of Velázquez's work. She proposes that "the reciprocity between absent viewer and world in view is produced not by the absence of a conscious human subject", as Foucault argues, but rather by "Velázquez's ambition to embrace two conflicting modes of representation, each of which constitutes the relationship between the viewer and the picturing of the world differently" (Alpers 1995: 288). In the first "the artist positions himself on the viewer's side of the picture surface and looks through the frame to the world, which he then reconstructs on the surface of the picture by means of the geometric convention of linear perspective" (p. 288). In the second mode, "the world produces its own image without a necessary frame. This replicative image is just there for the looking, without the intervention of the human maker. The world so seen is conceived of as existing prior to the artist-viewer" (p. 289).

Alpers concludes that

*Las Meninas* is produced not out of a single, classical notion of representation as Foucault suggests, but rather out of specific pictorial traditions of representation. It confounds a stable reading, not because of the absence of the viewer-subject, but because the painting holds in suspension two contradictory (and to Velázquez's sense of things, inseparable) modes of picturing the relationship of viewer, and picture, to world.

(Alpers 1995: 290)

Her argument that the painting "embrace[s] two conflicting modes of representation" (painting as window as opposed to painting as surface), seems founded on the very art-historical discourses she questions – in particular, discourses on naturalism. Similarly to Bryson, Alpers does not pay attention to the context in which *Las Meninas* appears in Foucault's archaeology of knowledge; nor does she pose questions of method beyond the parameters of art history and, crucially, Foucault's selection of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* itself. Foucault's positioning of Velázquez's painting has been largely taken up by scholars working within the context of



philosophy,<sup>14</sup> while Alpers's 1983 essay remains the most significant art-historical contribution.

This paper draws attention to the most influential art-historical methods in circulation at the time of the publication of Foucault's *Las Meninas* – in French in 1966 and in English in 1970. It investigates the ways in which Foucault's *Las Meninas* has been presented and critiqued in art-historical texts, and gauges its significance for the discipline, in particular, the “New Art History” of the 1970s and 1980s. The work of Fernie, Bryson and Alpers articulates the dissatisfaction on the part of the so-called New Art Historians with art history's emphasis on connoisseurship, the construction of the artwork's meaning via archival documents and iconographic and stylistic analysis. Both Alpers and Bryson conceive of art history as an insular, inward-looking discipline constrained by a canonical repository of methods. Bryson criticises art history's disengagement from important scholarly debates and its dissociation from work about art produced outside of the parameters of art history. His introductory essay foregrounds the work of scholars whose theoretical concerns, methodological questions and objects of inquiry are not necessarily prescribed and predetermined by disciplinary boundaries. Both Alpers and Bryson, contrasting literary scholarship with art-historical scholarship, argue that within art history, a preoccupation with the accurate reconstruction of the context of the work's production, together with an emphasis on banal perceptualism, evaded fundamental questions about the nature of representation, meaning and interpretation. Within the framework of art history, the work of Alpers and Bryson was, and indeed continues to be, important; their engagement with Foucault (albeit slight in the case of Bryson) was certainly groundbreaking. Both recognise that – against the backdrop of art-historical approaches to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* – Foucault's reading of the painting's pictorial surface was extraordinary in eliciting an unprecedented engagement with the artist's unusual and self-conscious configuration of the act of representation.

However, neither Bryson nor Alpers explores the significance of Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas* for his archaeology of knowledge, within which it performed important theoretical work. Bryson's introductory essay privileges the semiological and structuralist concept of the sign and proposes a hermeneutic and archival mandate for the study of art. But it evades the heterogeneous and contested nature of these methods and theoretical positions. His essay does not mention Foucault and Foucault's denunciation of structuralism in the preface to the English translation of *The Order of Things*. Alpers's 1983 essay is the most significant art-historical

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14. See footnote 5.

exploration of Foucault's *Las Meninas*. It draws attention to structural problems within art history and the constitution of its methods. However, her critique of Foucault's reading of *Las Meninas* remains constrained by the very parameters of the disciplinary methods she questions. Neither Bryson nor Alpers engages with the historical, philosophical, theoretical and methodological dimension of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and the significance of his enquiry into the writing of art histories. This absence within art-historical analysis creates further possibilities for scholarship.

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